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SUBJECT: THAILAND: POLITICAL CRISIS RETURNS TO THE STREETS
AS PAD PROVOKES CHAOTIC SHOWDOWN OUTSIDE PARLIAMENT

REF: A. BANGKOK 3020

1B. BANGKOK 3006

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary: Thailand's political crisis returned to the streets in chaotic fashion overnight October 6-7, as several thousand People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) demonstrators blockaded the Thai parliament to prevent the new government from presenting its policies to a joint House-Senate session.

Police initially cleared the PAD protesters with tear gas around 0620 October 7, allowing PM Somchai to deliver his opening remarks. However, PAD protesters drove off the police mid-day, reestablishing a blockade that trapped MPs, Senators, and for a while PM Somchai on the compound.

Ambassador reiterated separately to new Supreme Commander Songkitti Jaggabartra and the King's Principal Private Secretary Arsa Sarasin our core message to resolve the crisis peacefully using democratic means within the framework of the constitution, and to avoid a coup. Arsa lamented the direction of developments but strongly dismissed the possibility of a coup; Songkitti provided assurances the Thai military would support the government and follow the constitution.

12. (C) Comment: In retrospect, it appears that PAD leader Chamlong Srimuang sprung a perfect trap by consenting to be arrested October 5 (ref A). Chamlong's arrest gave renewed vigor to an increasingly dispirited PAD protest, at a time when a possible government-opposition agreement to form a commission to review possible constitutional changes threatened to take the winds completely out of the PAD sails.

The surprise blockade of parliament overnight led to the type of police crackdown that PAD leaders had tried to instigate in late August, without success. DPM Chavalit Yonchayuth, whom PM Somchai had appointed as the government's negotiator with PAD, resigned October 7, but the resignation may have had more to do with Chavalit's efforts on the south than the situation with the PAD (see septel). After a month of relative calm, the Thai political dynamic has lurched back into uncertainty. We recommend Washington/USG figures stick to our core message on the best way forward to resolve Thai political crisis. We are issuing a warden message advising AMCITS to avoid the affected areas in downtown Bangkok's government zone; it was business as usual in most of the city. End Comment.

PAD sparking renewed street action, or setting a trap?

13. (SBU) After five weeks of diminishing crowds at PAD's Government House compound occupation protest, the PAD reinvigorated its anti-government protest after the October 5

arrest of PAD leader Chamlong. The arrest in turn led to significantly increased crowds on October 5-6, from mere hundreds to over 10,000, allowing the PAD to launch an overnight blockade of parliament with several thousand supporters. Unlike its meek actions August 26 when PAD launched its occupation of Government House without police resistance, the Royal Thai Police (RTP) carried out a street clearing operation at 0620 October 7, using tear gas to disperse demonstrators. The clearance action allowed PM Somchai to deliver the government's policy statement to the joint House-Senate National Assembly. However, it also resulted in dozens of injuries, primarily tear gas related; several protesters were seriously wounded (see para 7 below).

¶4. (SBU) Police then inexplicably let down their guard while PM Somchai was speaking, and a secondary PAD effort reestablished the blockade. Media reported that PAD protesters used sticks to drive off the police from the main entrance into the parliamentary compound, then commandeered police vehicles to barricade the entrances, trapping MPs, Senators, and for a time PM Somchai inside. House Speaker Chai Chidchob then suspended the policy debate and canceled the session planned for October 8. At 1700, PAD allowed civil servants and journalists to leave the parliamentary compound but attempted to keep MPs, Senators, and Ministers inside. There were reports at COB that all MPs had been able to leave the compound thanks to a renewed police clearance effort.

¶5. (SBU) Later in the day, PM Somchai met military commanders and MFA officials in a previously scheduled briefing session on the Cambodian border dispute. In comments afterwards to the media, Somchai reiterated that he did not have plans to issue an emergency decree, dissolve the House, or resign.

¶6. (C) COL Saranyu Viriyavejakul, Aide de Camp to Army Commander GEN Anupong, told us late October 7 that Anupong was focused on keeping the Royal Thai Army (RTA) on the sidelines of the current crisis. Anupong was very concerned about the consequences if the military became involved, as there was no legal authority for the Army to exercise a role in controlling the PAD demonstrators in the absence of an emergency decree.

Reports of extensive injuries spark concern

¶7. (SBU) The RTP morning operation resulted in over 70 protesters being admitted to hospital, mainly with tear gas symptoms, but media reported a handful of more serious injuries, including one protester who lost a leg and a second who allegedly suffered shrapnel wounds. By mid-afternoon, after the mid-day clashes, hospital personnel confirmed to us that the number of admitted had risen to 101, that most but not all of the injuries were consistent with tear gas and trampling injuries, and that one protester had lost a leg. Several police were reported injured in the mid-day clashes.

¶8. (SBU) Police COL Suwat, deputy Commander of the Metropolitan Police for Demonstrations/Intelligence, told us the police had only used tear gas and flash bangs in the morning operation. The RTP believed a crude homemade pipebomb with black powder, similar to fireworks and likely in a metal container, had exploded, perhaps accounting for the more seriously wounded. One woman had lost a leg when the bomb exploded; the RTP believed the bomb belonged to the PAD.

¶9. (SBU) Mid afternoon, a jeep exploded near Chat Thai Party HQ, about 1km from the parliament, killing a female PAD supporter. Forensic investigators on the scene told us the Jeep's compressed natural gas (CNG) cannister had been lit/exploDED.

Arsa's lament - bad timing, but not coup worthy

¶10. (C) Ambassador asked Principal Private Secretary Arsa Sarasin October 7 about the theory that someone in the Palace had greenlighted Chamlong's arrest (ref A). Arsa professed

astonishment, stating that Chamlong had wanted to be arrested, and the Government "fell right into his trap." Developments since happened exactly as Chamlong had hoped. When the opposition and the ruling parties agreed October 3 to form a joint committee for the revision of the Constitution, that spelled the potential end for the PAD (ref B). Chamlong orchestrated his arrest, therefore, to inject new life into the PAD, and it had worked perfectly.

¶11. (C) Arsa professed that he had no idea what would happen, but speculated that this current crisis may result in the dissolution of Parliament, which was exactly what the PAD wanted. Arsa reiterated to Ambassador that this renewed crisis could not happen at a worse time. Princess Galyani's royal funeral is November 14-19; the King's birthday celebrations are December 2-8, and the ASEAN and ASEAN Dialogue Partners Summits are December 13-18. If Parliament were to be dissolved, it would be very difficult for Somchai to chair these summit meetings as Acting PM, since he would not be permitted to determine policy matters in that capacity.

¶12. (C) Ambassador reiterated our concern about a potential coup. Arsa strongly dismissed this possibility, stating that "GEN Anuphong would not resort to a coup. I know him and I know he would not do that."

Supreme Commander Songkitti - don't worry

¶13. (C) Royal Thai Armed Forces Supreme Commander General Songkitti Jaggabartra, who assumed his duties October 1, told Ambassador October 7 that the political situation in Thailand was not extraordinary and reflected the current state of development of Thai democracy. Songkitti said the early morning actions by the Royal Thai Police to clear demonstrators from the Parliament were within the rule of law. Ambassador reiterated U.S. policy concerns. Songkitti stated several times: "there is no need to worry; the Thai military will follow the constitution and support the government to resolve the crisis."

JOHN